

Breathe by tetrahedron

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Fix-It, Mothers and Daughters, Time Skips

Language: English

Characters: Eleven, Kali, Martin Brenner, Terry Ives

Relationships: Eleven & Terry Ives

Status: Completed

Published: 2017-12-05

Updated: 2017-12-05

Packaged: 2022-04-03 05:09:41

Rating: General Audiences

Warnings: Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings

Chapters: 1

Words: 2,959

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

Fix-it fic where Eleven comes back w/ Kali to help her mom. Because how about we *not* leave Terry trapped in a hellish nightmare spiral forever.

Breathe

“Slip my hand from your hand

Leave you dancing with a ghost”

Breathe

In the beginning, you used to keep count. 10 births, 150 births, 365 births. But time in the dream circle revolves faster than you can follow. You’ve lost track of how many rings you’ve made trapped in this orbit, a sad, frozen little moon. By rights, you ought to be mother to over a thousand children by now. At the very least, you should be mother to the one they keep taking from you.

And yet even though it’s happened more times than you can count, some stubborn, yearning part of you is still hoping that this time will be different. That you’ll hear *breathe*, stumble once again down that terrible corridor, and find yourself somewhere new. A room full of light and friendly faces, where there is no haze of suspicion and fear, no cold pressure of the knife sliding down your stomach. Where you hear that thin, high cry, and find the nurse looking down at you with a smile. Where you watch her lower your daughter into your long waiting arms.

Of course, it doesn’t happen.

They prep you even though you told them you wanted a natural birth; no drugs, no surgery. You’d spent months locked away in his laboratory, you thought you were strong enough that the pain couldn’t touch you. But you feel the cold prick of the needle in your spine and after that you don’t feel anything, not even when they cut a seam down your abdomen.

This is it, the moment when the woman you were was supposed to change into something all new and wonderful, transformed by the warm glow of motherhood. But the delivery was botched, your metamorphosis stunted. They claimed that Jane died that night, but

it was Terry who took her final breath on the operating table, who felt the last trace of her old life slip away with the warm, living body of her daughter. Goodbye to peace of mind, to comfort, to restful sleep. The new you is a pitiful creature, stillborn and bereft, perpetually shuffling through shadows in search of something it will never recover.

Ah, but here she is. *Jane*. Even now, a thousand births older and yet no wiser, your whole body aches to hold her. The midwife told you newborns are terrified when they're born, that your voice would be the only familiar thing in a strange, frightening place. But you only get one word before they take her away.

Sunflower

The washed out late afternoon light filters in through dim hospital windows. You feel hollow and raw, like someone took an ice-cream scoop and scraped out your insides, heart, liver, lungs and all. What's left is barely enough to make up a person. The hospital sheets are like sandpaper against your skin, the drone of the intercom an irritating buzz in your ear. Becky sits at your side, mouthing a series of useless platitudes. She thinks that *Jane* is dead. You try to correct her, tell her she is not dead but *taken*. It's pointless. How can you explain? That if she was dead, it would be different. That if she was dead, you could rest.

After a while you turn away, watching the sunflower nod against the glass, waiting.

You know where she is. You know who has her.

Three to the right, four to the left

You tried to do it the right way. It makes you burn to think of all the years you wasted on criminal charges and lawsuits. But while your appeals languish in the courts, you've been preparing a back up plan. Every delay is one more day your daughter has to live with a monster. It's time to bring her home.

You wind the dial of the safe until you feel the lock click open. The gun is a satisfying weight in your hand. You've practiced aiming it,

loading it, firing it, spent sleepless nights wondering if you're capable of killing with it, too.

You get your answer when you walk through those doors in Hawkins, Indiana.

He's not a doctor, not a researcher, just a man in uniform who made the fatal mistake of getting between you and your child. The bullet hits him in the gut. He goes down groaning, and all you feel is a cold anger.

Rainbow

You don't have much time. Your heels are clicking down the empty hallway, the sound echoing off the walls, when out of the corner of your eye you see it, that little paper rainbow. Who put it up, you wonder now, watching the cycle play out again. A well-meaning nurse? One of the secretaries? It hurts to think that they were trying to be kind to her, even though you hope to God that somebody in that place was.

You open the door. And there she is again. *Jane*. They have in her a dress, her hair clean and pulled back from her face, and for a moment the relief is overwhelming. You found her, she's alive, they haven't hurt her, not yet.

It's not as painful as childbirth, but it's a near thing. To be so close, and to lose her again. And again, and again, and again. If you could, you'd close your eyes.

Jane and the other little girl stare wide-eyed as the guards come and pull you away.

450

Even after all these years, your heartbeat still quickens at the sight of his face. It's a learned response, like a dog salivating at the sound of a bell- a lasting side effect of the operant conditioning you experienced during the year you spent in his care. Was it really only a year? It felt like centuries, locked up in that room like a princess in a tower, waiting for the prince to come and set you free. Sometimes time ran

so fast you could barely breathe, and sometimes it dragged out slow as nails down a chalkboard, until you wondered if he had finally grown tired of you, left you to rot like a dead rat in the Skinner box. You were so grateful each time he opened the door. You were never sure if it was going to be the last time.

He'd bring you pills that made the world erupt into symphony of colors, so bright you could hear them even in the claustrophobic dark of the sensory isolation chamber. Sometimes they kept you awake for days, until you could sense the horrible sly hissing of voices speaking to you from hidden cracks in the walls. Sometimes he didn't come at all, or someone else came in his place. You learned not to trust the faces of strangers, the men and women he sent to administer aversive stimuli. And yet after a time you began to look forward to these sessions too, because you knew that afterward, when they had left you cowering and whimpering against the walls of your cell, he would return to tell you how special you were, how well you were doing, how proud he was of you. You believed him. You would have believed anything, if it kept him coming back.

He slips the rubber guard into your mouth, his hand lingering on your cheek, and you wonder if he always knew this is how it would end, if this is what he was secretly imagining each time he came to you, everything else between you just foreplay leading up to the climax of this final confinement within your own body, the princess in the tower, the princess *and* the tower-

Part of you is glad you didn't get the chance to shoot him. A bullet is too good for this man.

Now he leans over you with that same smile, the one you'd see every time he closed the door. Only this time he's closing it for good, he's locking you up in a place where nobody can get in and you'll never get out, no doors, no keys, just breathe, sunflower, three to the right four to the left, rainbow, four-fifty, breathe sunflower three to the right four to the left rainbow four-fifty, *breathesunflowerthreetotherightfourtothelefttrainbowfour-fifty*

Can you help her?

The voice is distant, like it's happening in another room. You turn your face back to the window. The sunflower droops against the glass.

I can't undo what he did. But I think I can transpose new images over the old memories. At least, I can try. Your hands are turning the dial on the safe. 3 to the right, 4 to the left.

I don't understand, Becky says from somewhere far away. Brenner smiles down at you. 450, he says to the technician. His eyes never leave your face.

Mama, you hear a familiar voice say, and the sound sends tears smarting in your eyes. You are watching her be born again, your sweet baby girl, all brand new and so perfect it makes your chest ache to look at her. Here and then gone. The sunflower in the window. The gun in the safe. Now she's looking back out at you through the door of the rainbow room. Jane.

You feel her hand slip into yours.

You hold your breath, bracing to see Brenner's face again, waiting for the doors to open and close.

Instead, you see a girl with dark shadows under her eyes, and a shock of purple hair.

Breathe, she says, placing her palms on either side of your face.

You start back violently, flinching away from her touch.

Please. She holds a hand out to you, palm up, beseeching. *Let me show you something new.*

From behind you, you can hear the beeping of the hospital monitor, muffled groans, and a high, thin wail that slices through your heartstrings like a hot knife through butter. You hesitate, every instinct urging you to turn back, find the source of that sound. But instead, you slowly reach out to the girl.

As your fingers touch hers, the room around you shimmers like ripples in a pond, dissolving into a cloud of tiny purple and gold

butterflies. You stare in wonder. Their wings brush against your cheeks, gossamer soft.

Don't be frightened, the girl says, smiling. *They're not real.*

When they clear, you are looking at a woman in her forties, with fine lines around her eyes and mouth, and long, dark hair. You've seen her before somewhere, you think. A memory surfaces. She was standing in front of you, holding out a flier. *My son. Please. Have you seen him?*

A mother, then. You study her more closely. She is a fighter, you can see it in the lines of her faces, the way she holds herself, weathered but not beaten.

There is a shift in the space between you, and you gasp.

Your daughter is with her. Your baby girl, with all her hair all cut away, wearing a sopping wet pink dress, her breath coming in ragged gulps and her eyes wide in terror.

You want to cry out, to help her, to hold her, but you can't speak, can't move-

The woman doesn't hesitate. She wraps her arms around your daughter, cradling her. *It's okay*, she says. *I got you. I got you, I got you.* She repeats it over and over until the words disintegrate into a meaningless string of syllables. You watch your daughter slowly stop shivering, her breath evening out.

She's not alone, the girl says, startling you with her closeness. *She wanted you to know. She found friends. A family.*

The woman fades away, and in her place you see a man standing behind your daughter. He's dressed like a policeman, and the sight of the uniform sends a ripple of fear down your spine.

It's all right, the girl says. *He'll protect her.*

You want to believe her. But there is something in his face that makes you afraid, a darkness that clings to him like the smell of old cigarettes. His hands are so big on your daughter's small shoulders.

You want to warn her that men like him can't be trusted, men who don't keep their promises, who don't know the difference between love and fear. You try to speak, but the words get trapped somewhere in your throat. For the millionth time you mourn the silence imposed on you, your stolen voice. There is so much you want to tell her. How men can turn your love against you. How they can hurt you, over and over again, until you start to believe that you deserve it.

How can they do it, you wonder, choking back the words, and still tell you they love you? And how can you ever believe them when they say it?

There is so much you want to tell her, but nothing more urgent than this: that love isn't real unless it sets you free.

The girl must sense your agitation, because she takes your hand and leads you away, the policeman fading behind you like smoke in the wind.

She leads you into a crowded room all strung with tiny blue lights that glow like fireflies in the dark. Everywhere you look there are children, standing in groups or paired off together under the lights.

Look, she says, pointing at two swaying figures.

It's Jane, you realize with a start. She's dancing with a boy you haven't seen before, small and slight, with a mop of dark hair. He's holding her at arms length, but tightly, like he's afraid she'll disappear if he so much as blinks. And for a moment that same fear claws its way up your spine (*how can you be sure, how can you ever be sure?*) but then you see her face and something slides into place like the click of a bolt unlocking, a door swinging open into the sunlight. Because she's smiling, your baby girl, happiness radiating out from her so brightly she's practically glowing. She's wearing a simple denim dress and she looks different than the other times you've seen her. Ordinary, you think, your heartbeat slowing. Just a girl dancing with a boy, a child in a gymnasium full of children. Not shut away in a laboratory, or banished to the dark corners of the mind, but out in the light of the world. Where she always should have been.

You catch your breath watching her. She's so grown up, most of the

softness already gone from her face, and she moves with the half-awkward grace of a teenager.

Standing there in the dark, you feel an echo of the pain you felt when they took her away, a sharp ache at the spot above your breast where her head should have lain. Suddenly you feel old, and tired, and lost. Time has moved on without you. Your baby is gone, long gone. You'll never get to hold her.

But they will, you think, the woman, the policeman, this boy. Everything you wanted to give her, she'll get. Just not from you. The realization stings, and even though you know it's selfish, you feel a bitter lump of resentment rise in your throat. You can't help it. You've spent years trapped on this merry-go-round, waiting for a moment that will never come.

It could be so much worse, you know. She's lucky to have them. Gratitude dulls the edges of your grief, until it retreats back into your heart like an old dog settling into its kennel. She won't be alone, you tell yourself. One door closes, another opens.

The girl is speaking again, trying to show you something, but you only have eyes for your daughter out there on the dance floor, surrounded by her friends and family, safe, and loved, and free.

The room starts to go distant and fuzzy at the edges. *No*, you think, straining towards the two figures still slowly swaying back and forth. *Not yet.*

But the lights dim and the shadows lengthen. When they clear, both the girl and your daughter are gone.

You are back in the delivery room. Your heart sinks, but you resign yourself to yet another birth, another spin around the endless wheel of shadows lit here and there by bright, stolen glimpses of your child. Figures hover at your side in white and green, the same hospital scrubs, the same faces you've seen a thousand times.

But something is different. The room is brighter, the faces kinder. There is no pain, no lurch of recognition and fear, just the soothing murmur of voices, and a familiar pressure.

When it breaks, you hear a high pitched cry.

The nurse smiles, and moves closer. Holding your breath, you open your arms.

Breathe.

Kali pulled back. With a heavy sigh, she sank down next to Eleven, wiping the blood from her upper lip. "I think it worked."

Becky looked from her sister to the girls in confusion. "What did you do?" she asked, her voice shaky.

Eleven raised her head, and swallowed. "Com-promise," she said wearily.

"What?"

She turned away, reaching up to scrape one fist across her eyes. "Halfway happy," she said, nodding towards her mother.

Terry's eyes were closed, and there were tears running down her face, but she was smiling.

"We should go," Kali said, with a quick glance up at the clock. "They'll be looking for us."

Eleven nodded, and then hesitated, biting her lip. Abruptly she leaned in to embrace her mother, gripping her tightly with all the force in her small body. She could feel her mother's heartbeat, slow and steady against her cheek. She closed her eyes, and took in a long breath.

"Goodbye Mama," she whispered. "Sweet dreams."

Author's Note:

Slow Disco